

The Dark Shadow of Faust: The Anti-Semitic Tradition of Reading Mephistopheles as the “Jewish Spirit”

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(I)

Every student of European literature knows about Thomas Mann’s application of the Faust legend to German history in his novel *Doktor Faustus*, in which Mephistopheles comes to approximate the dark force of fascism that leads the country into the abyss. Mann’s appropriation of this 16th century story was so powerful, and the collapse of the Third Reich so total, that his interpretation almost completely wiped out even the traces of an earlier, and altogether different reading of the Faustian pact with the devil. This was the reading that formed a tradition among German anti-Semites, who saw in the devil not the spectre of a burgeoning movement of racist totalitarianism, but the spectre of Judaism. Particularly Goethe’s famous dramatization, which played a pivotal role in placing the Faust legend squarely at the centre of the German literary imagination, was interpreted in this light from time to time. Kurt Lüdecke, a high-ranking Nazi during the party’s early years who later fell from grace and emigrated to the US, relates in his memoirs how, when as a young boy he had attempted to read Goethe’s play, his father had admonished him: “*Faust* you cannot understand if you do not know that Goethe personified in Faust the struggling German soul and in Mephistopheles the tempting Jew.”¹ The man Faust is still the embodiment of the German spirit, in restless pursuit of the beyond; but his eternal adversary, his metaphysical nemesis and greatest danger is not to be sought in any totalitarian ideology, but in the devilish force of “the Jew.”

In what follows, we will trace the tradition of this sinister reading, from its hesitant emergence towards the end of the 19th century, through to its full-blown development in the fiercely aggressive works of Dietrich Eckart, a Nazi demagogue often identified as Hitler’s mentor. In studies either of the Faust legend in general, or of Goethe’s version of it in particular, this is an aspect of its reception history that has received very little attention. In large measure, this is undoubtedly the result of a widespread neglect of anti-Semitic literature after the collapse of Hitlerism; for despite the dire consequences of their pathological theories, the writings of men like Eugen Dühring, Theodor Fritsch, Dietrich Eckart, or Alfred Rosenberg have rarely been studied in detail. With regard to Goethe, the relative neglect of this issue may also be a consequence of the general trend today to soft-pedal the continued centrality of Germany’s greatest writer in the Third Reich. But while it is certainly true that much of what Goethe stood for ran directly counter to the perverse philosophy of the Nazis, it should

¹ Kurt Lüdecke, *I Knew Hitler*, 18.

surprise nobody that they nevertheless did everything in their power to claim him as their own. “Nenne mir, Deutscher, *das* deutsche Buch schlechthin, es ist der *Faust*. Nenne mir *den* deutschen Dichter, es ist Goethe”² – thus the *Reichsjugendführer* Baldur von Schirach in a speech from 1937. A review of a new staging of *Faust* in the *Völkischer Beobachter* hailed the work as “das gewaltigste aller Weihespiele,” lavishly praising “[d]ieses im *Faust* eingeschlossene germanische dynamische Wesen der Weltüberwindung und des Kampfes.”³ And in Joseph Goebbels’ novel *Michael*, a strange mixture of lachrymose sentimentality and seething hatreds, the eponymous hero muses: “Ich war in Frankfurt und habe dem jungen Goethe meine Reverenz gemacht. Auch heute noch Führer im Streit der Geister. Vorkämpfer jedes jungen Willens.”⁴ Similar quotes could be collected *ad nauseam*.

On the other hand, it must also be stressed that there was never any broad consensus on the issue of reading *Faust* from an anti-Semitic perspective, even among extreme Jew haters. In fact, the opinion voiced by Lüdecke’s father was scarcely that of the majority of anti-Semites, most of whom probably spent precious little time on the contemplation of high art. There seems to be no evidence, moreover, to suggest that Mephistopheles was endowed with caricatured Jewish features in performances of Goethe’s play during the time of the Third Reich. In the same review from the *Völkischer Beobachter* quoted from above, the writer points to “Gustav Gründgens großangelegte und konsequent durchgeführte kalte Diabolik, bei der man freilich die chevalereske Note des spezifisch deutschen Teufels vermißte” – a formulation that makes it perfectly obvious that at least this Nazi scribbler did not consider Mephistopheles to be a Jewish figure. Another contemporary observer of Gründgens’s performance, Marcel Reich-Ranicki, remarks in his autobiography: “Ich werde seinen Mephisto nie aus dem Gedächtnis verlieren.”⁵ And though Reich-Ranicki regarded Gründgens as “den Antityp der Zeit,” the polar opposite of the official Nazi aesthetics of *Blut und Boden*, the fact that he says nothing whatsoever about any anti-Jewish elements in the characterization of Mephistopheles is virtually conclusive proof that none were there to be seen.⁶ Furthermore, in a miserable

² Baldur von Schirach, *Goethe an Uns: Ewige Gedanken Des Grossen Deutschen*, 7. Later on (p. 29), Schirach refers to Goethe as “Des deutschen Volkes großer Erzieher.” Incidentally, already Friedrich Ludwig Jahn had asserted that Faust “ganz besonders ist ein Deutsches volksthümliches Wesen, unser Ikarus und Phaeton; immerwiederauflebender Bauherr, bis auf unsere Tage.” On the next page he confesses: “Was ich vom Faust weiß, habe ich zuerst von Göthe gelernt, dem *Deutschesten* Dichter.” *Deutsches Volksthum*, 391-2.

³ *Völkischer Beobachter*, May 23, 1933, No. 143.

⁴ Joseph Goebbels, *Michael. Ein deutsches Schicksal in Tagebuchsblättern*, 10. The text goes on: “Ich trage nur ein Buch in der Tasche: den Faust. Den ersten Teil lese ich. Für den zweiten bin ich zu dumm.”

⁵ Marcel Reich-Ranicki, *Mein Leben*, 125.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 124. In a relatively recent novel by Nicholas Mosley, however, the protagonist attends a different *Faust* performance in Nazi Germany, in connection with which he remarks: “I suppose there have been other performances in which Faust has been portrayed as a naive and even neurotic upward-striving Aryan and Mephistopheles as a crafty and manipulative Jew [...] In this production Kreuz presented himself obviously as some prototype of a Nazi: he wore leather boots and a brown tunic belted at the waist; [...] When Liebermann as Mephistopheles appeared, he

book otherwise exclusively devoted to portraying Goethe as a forerunner of the Nazi movement, Max Maurenbrecher's *Goethe und die Juden*, the anti-Semitic reading of *Faust* is not even alluded to.⁷ We should be wary, then, of regarding this tradition as any central strand in the history of German Jew-hatred, or of censuring the negligence of eminent experts in the field as a gross oversight. Even so, when the Nazi journal *Der Stürmer* featured a vicious caricature of a Jewish Mephistopheles offering a poisonous draught to an Aryan Faust on its front page in 1932, the illustrator must have known that he was not the first to press this famous couple into the service of an anti-Semitic ideology.⁸ We may be dealing here with a footnote, yet it is nevertheless a footnote that merits our attention, as it may throw additional light on the development of a mentality that reached its terrifying climax in the Holocaust.

(II)

That an anti-Semitic reading of the Faust legend would emerge now appears more or less as a foregone conclusion given the steady spread of anti-Jewish ideologies in the 19th century. The devil had been associated with Jews at least since the Middle Ages, and however unsavoury it may be to modern sensibilities, it should come as no surprise that one of the historical figures *Der Stürmer* quoted most often was Jesus Christ, whose "You are of your father the devil" (John 8:44) was used to underscore this same pernicious association.⁹ In the legend of Theophilus of Adana, which has been identified as a possible source for the Faust story, the association is quite explicit: Theophilus' encounter with the devil is mediated by "a certain wicked Jew, a practicer of all sorts of diabolical arts, who had already plunged many into the deep pit of perdition by his unchristian counsels."¹⁰ It has become a perhaps all too readily accepted commonplace in modern scholarship that the 19th century witnessed the emergence of a biologically grounded racial anti-Semitism, which gradually supplanted an earlier version of a theologically founded anti-Judaism. But only the first part of this statement is true: racial theories did contribute to a deepening of an already existing hatred, but at the same time, the Jews' alleged hostility to Christianity remained one of the deadliest weapons in the arsenal of the anti-Semites right down to the end of the Third Reich.¹¹ When anti-Semitism emerged

was a huge man in a long black cloak and a wide-brimmed hat: he had his hair in ringlets" (*Hopeful Monsters*, 124). But this is a work of fiction, entirely devoid of evidentiary value in the present context.

⁷ Max Maurenbrecher, *Goethe und die Juden*. The work forms the third volume of "Deutschlands führende Männer und das Judentum," a series that also included titles on Luther, Schopenhauer, and Wagner.

⁸ *Der Stürmer*, July, 1932, No. 29. A caption beneath the illustration reads: "Du wirst mit diesem Trank im Magen dem Juden dienen, – Deinen Bruder erschlagen."

⁹ The best exposition of this theme remains Joshua Trachtenberger's *The Devil and The Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and Its Relation to Modern Anti-Semitism*.

¹⁰ Philip Mason Palmer, *The Sources of the Faust Tradition; from Simon Magus to Lessing*, 62.

¹¹ Richard Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919-1945*. Though Steigmann-Gall's study has much to recommend it, he frequently overstates his case, while at the

as a political movement towards the end of the 1870s, Rohling's *Der Talmudjude*, which denounced the Jews for the perverse immorality putatively embodied in the sacred texts of Judaism, became one of its central propagandistic texts. It can be stated with confidence, therefore, that there already existed a latent predisposition in the literary imagination of 19th century Europe to charge any artistic representation of the devil with anti-Semitic features by tapping into this long tradition. It was certainly nothing that happened automatically; but if the inclination was there, the interpretative schema was readily available.

In addition to his hatred of Christianity, the devil of the Faust legend has other attributes that would have recommended him to 19th century anti-Semites as an embodiment of the threat they felt the Jews posed to Germany. Despite his overriding objective of seeing Faust condemned to the tortures of hell, he is never himself violent.¹² Like Shakespeare's Shylock, he does crave that his victim be violently cut to pieces, but he accomplishes this not through his own physical force, but instead through a contract. Or consider Fagin, "the most nearly archetypal Jew which the nineteenth century had to offer,"¹³ whose intimate connection with Satan Dickens makes palpable throughout *Oliver Twist*: though a formidable criminal, his body is weak, almost crippled.¹⁴ Exercising his thievery by proxies, he vanquishes adversaries with his intellect, sending old accomplices to the gallows by setting them up to be caught by the police. Just like Marlowe's Jew Barabbas – a third figure that fits perfectly in this category – Fagin's foremost weapon is his "cunning." Similarly, German anti-Semites hardly ascribed to Jews any propensity for physical violence, while the accusation of trickery and deceit was absolutely central to their case. Though the Jews had allegedly robbed the Germans of their land, they had done so not by violent conquest, in which art the Germanic peoples had been far more proficient, but by stealth and ruse, ensnaring inexperienced farmers, gullible burghers and

same time exaggerating the novelty of his claims. That the emergence of Nazism did not by any means constitute a clean break with Germany's Christian traditions has always been perfectly evident to serious scholars in the field. Another recent work dealing more specifically with Hitler's personal views on religion and Christianity is Michael Rissmann's *Hitlers Gott: Vorsehungsglaube und Sendungsbewusstsein des deutschen Diktators*.

¹² In Christopher Marlowe's famous dramatization, Mephistophilis does at one point threaten Faustus that he will "in piecemeal tear thy flesh" (*Doctor Faustus*, 48) unless the doctor abandons his thoughts of breaking the contract; and in some of the later German puppet plays, Faustus would be dragged off the stage by devils at the end. In general, however, the Mephistophelian devil is remarkably pacific, staying aloof from any directly physical intervention in the course of events.

¹³ Edgar Rosenberg, *From Shylock to Svengali; Jewish Stereotypes in English Fiction*, 138.

¹⁴ When the eponymous hero of the novel first encounters Fagin, the latter is described as standing in the glow of a fireplace, a pitchfork – a traditional attribute of the devil – in his hand. He is also repeatedly given the epithet "merry old gentleman," which is "still a well-known euphemism for the devil" (Rosenberg, *From Shylock to Svengali*, 125). It is bemusing to see the lengths to which some scholars of English literature have gone in order to soft-pedal the anti-Semitism of Dickens' famous novel, habitually pointing to some exculpatory remarks made by the author late in his life in self-defence, after criticism had been levelled at this aspect of the book. The *Völkischer Beobachter* serialized *Oliver Twist* already in 1923, during its first year as the official organ of the Nazi party. Particularly the pronounced Manichaeism of this novel – its very sharp division between good and evil – makes its potential emotional impact so strong.

avaricious princes in non-transparent financial deals that promised immediate wealth, but always ended in ruin and debt.

Indeed, the motif of the contract, with its concomitant elements of persuasion and legal compulsion, is without a doubt the one aspect of the Faust story that is most central to the anti-Semitic reading. Again, physical force is unnecessary – or rather, it will be provided by the state – when the victim can be ensnared in the economic laws of a society he himself is responsible for. This is how the German aristocrat Freiherr Rothsattel is brought down by the Jews Hirsch Ehrenthal and Veitel Itzig in Gustav Freytag's *Soll und Haben* (1855); and in a never-performed play by an obscure anti-Semitic journalist, Otto Glagau, another *Gutsherr* who is about to lose his possessions coldly tells his Jewish adversary when he finally realizes the trap he had been set: "Sie sind mein böser Dämon gewesen; und wie ich anfangs zu begreifen, haben Sie mich systematisch verlockt und umgarnt!"¹⁵

In addition, the customary explanation for why Jews were so proficient in the arts of deception was that they were devoid of all idealism. Their entire ambition was allegedly directed at *this* world, over which they strove with all their might to win ultimate power. While the Germans' tendency towards romantic otherworldliness and *Schwärmerei* had the danger of making them lethargic and inattentive towards everyday reality, the Jews' innate realism lent them an uncanny industriousness and prowess in material affairs. As a substantiation of this view, a jotting from one of Goethe's notebooks, published only after his death, was often pressed into service: "Keiner, auch nur der kleinste, geringste Jude, der nicht entschiedenes Bestreben verriete, und zwar ein irdisches, zeitliches, augenblickliches."¹⁶ As we shall see, this train of thought was taken to a chilling climax in the figure of Dietrich Eckart, whose central contention it was that the ultimate objective of the Jewish race consisted in nothing less than "die Entseelung der Welt."¹⁷

Also important to note is that the duplicitous nature of the devil found symbolic expression in his deceptive appearance. Mephistopheles is a shape shifter, always hiding his true identity beneath a deceptive surface. His name, indeed, has been proposed to be a corruption of Nephostophiles, a lover of clouds, further highlighting his secretive nature.¹⁸ Already in the earliest *Faustbuch* of 1587, Faustus commands Mephistopheles to assume the physical form of a Franciscan monk, and in Goethe's drama, the devil reacts irritably when the witch calls him "den Junker Satan," shooting back: "Den Namen, Weib, verbitt' ich

¹⁵ Otto Glagau, *Aktien: Historisches Schauspiel aus der allerjüngsten Vergangenheit in fünf Acten*, 105.

¹⁶ Goethe, *Skizziertes. Zweifelhaftes. Unvollständiges*, in: *Berliner Ausgabe*, Bd. 18, 670. Or immediately before this dictum: "Unmittelbare Zwecke." It will be seen, however, that this characterization is in fact at odds with the idea that in the field of finance, it was the Jews who bested the Germans by holding out to them the prospect of immediate rewards, while the Jews themselves had patience enough to wait for theirs.

¹⁷ Dietrich Eckart, "Das Judentum in und außer uns," in: Alfred Rosenberg, *Dietrich Eckart: Ein Vermächtnis*, 219.

¹⁸ For instance by William Godwin in his *Lives of the Necromancers*, 336.

mir!”¹⁹ Instead, he is almost foppish in his new-fangled elegance, bragging that “Ich bin ein Kavalier, wie andre Kavalier” (2511). And when the same witch remarks that she cannot see the devil’s cloven feet, he confesses that these traditional attributes would be of no use to him in the modern world, and that he therefore “bedien’ ich mich, wie mancher junge Mann, / Seit vielen Jahren falscher Waden” (2501-2). Mephistopheles’ refinement does not go very deep, however, and during the “Prolog im Himmel,” he asks God to excuse his deficient command of language: “Verzeih, ich kann nicht hohe Worte machen, [...] Mein Pathos brächte dich gewiß zum Lachen, / Hättst du dir nicht das Lachen abgewöhnt” (275-8). Indeed, exactly the type of caustic wit that Goethe’s devil is so marvellously proficient in was customarily thought of as Jewish in anti-Semitic circles, for which claim Heine and Börne usually served as the prime examples.²⁰

The theme of deception also acquired heightened significance as more and more Jews were assimilated into German society, and as the economic realities of the modern world became ever more complex. To be sure, a figure like Fagin still retained his demonic force as a masterful artistic creation, but his link with contemporary Jewry was becoming increasingly tenuous towards the end of the 19th century. His relevance to the anti-Semitic cause, therefore, seemed to be dwindling, and it was obvious that he could only be of limited propagandistic use against the figure typified by the Rothschilds and Bleichröder: the figure of the immensely wealthy banker whose tremendous power was uncannily at odds with his low public profile. Always hiding in the shadows, this spectral Jewish financier was nevertheless imagined to control the fate of nations through his malevolent machinations. It is against this background that we need to view the one statement that perhaps did more than any other to create a link between anti-Semitism and the Faust myth: in his *Die Juden und das Wirtschaftsleben* of 1911, Werner Sombart remarked:

Aber wenn wir auch unter den Regierenden des modernen Staates keine Juden finden, so können wir uns diese Regierenden, können wir uns den modernen Fürsten nicht gut ohne den Juden denken. (Etwa wie Faust nicht ohne Mephistopheles.) Arm in Arm schreiten die beiden in den Jahrhunderten, die wir die Neuzeit nennen, einher.²¹

Even though this is nothing more than a parenthetical simile used to illustrate an argument, anti-Semitic propagandists immediately picked up on it.²² It was the

¹⁹ In: Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *Goethes Werke: Hamburger Ausgabe in 14 Bänden*, verse 2505. References to *Faust* will henceforth be given in the main text by verse numbers.

²⁰ Heinrich von Treitschke, for instance, discusses Heine’s “jüdische[n] Verstand” and “frühreife cynische Welterfahrung” in his *Deutsche Geschichte im neunzehnten Jahrhundert. Dritter Teil*, 711. Julius Werner calls Heine “Ein Mittelding zwischen Don Juan und Mephistopheles” in his *Soziales Christentum: Vorträge und Aufsätze über die großen Fragen der Zeit*, 91.

²¹ Werner Sombart, *Die Juden und das Wirtschaftsleben*, 50.

²² Theodor Fritsch, *Die Juden im Handel und das Geheimnis ihres Erfolges: Zugleich ein Antwort und Ergänzung zu Sombarts Buch: “Die Juden und das Wirtschaftsleben”*, 69. Dietrich Eckart, *Der Bolschewismus von Moses bis Lenin: Zwiegespräch zwischen Adolf Hitler und mir*, 21.

perfect image to help interpret a bafflingly complicated economic reality by means of an essentially atavistic mythology. Behind Bismarck was Bleichröder; and behind Faust was Mephistopheles, the Jewish devil.

(III)

Despite these general parallels, the anti-Semitic reading of the Faust myth was nevertheless slow to emerge, and rarely was it pursued in any detail. Typically, we encounter only brief allusions, as in the remark from Sombart just quoted. In a pamphlet from 1882, for example, dealing with the Jewish influence on German literature, the writer at one point laments: "Auch in dem sogenannten Kulturkampf spielte die jüdische Presse den Mephisto."²³ Or in an article about the Jews in England: "Fast ausnahmslos ist der Jude [...] im Punkte der Religion ein Mephisto, 'der Geist, der stets verneint.'"²⁴ A third writer contrasts the "blonden Germanen" with the dark Jews in a treatise on race:

Als habe die Geschichte dem blonden Göttervolk eine dunkle Folie geben wollen, von der sich seine Heldengestalten um so markanter herausheben, ist dieser brunette Südländstypus hinauf in den Norden verschlagen worden – Faust und Mephisto! Dem leuchtenden Halbgott droben in den Sonnenwolken antwortet aus der Tiefe des Inferno der Geist der Verneinung, Satanas.²⁵

Though these examples demonstrate that the binarism inherent in the Faust/Mephistopheles construction could sometimes be superimposed on the putative binarism of German/Jew, they obviously remain very much on the surface. This was also generally the case among those writers who tied the anti-Semitic reading explicitly to Goethe. Kurt Hiller, who was himself of Jewish extraction, quotes Faust's angry phrase "Du Spottgeburt von Dreck und Feuer" (3536), and then goes on to ask: "ob der erlauchteste Antisemit der Deutschen, als er seinem Geschöpf Mephistopheles diese Formel versetzte, nebenbei an das Judentum gedacht hat?"²⁶ Artur Dinter, the infamous racist novelist, answered this question in the affirmative, but again without providing anything in the way of explanation: "Nicht ohne Vorbedacht verleiht Goethe dem Mephisto jüdische Züge."²⁷ Another anti-Semite does provide at least some detail in an essay on *Faust* for the *Bayreuther Blätter*, even though its bizarre excursions into European racial history most likely failed to win many new converts to the cause. Early on we are instructed:

Wenn das deutsche Volk seinen Goethe besser verstünde, dann stünde es besser um das deutsche Volk. Und das bezieht sich

²³ Joseph Lerique, *Das Judentum in der deutschen Literatur*, 32.

²⁴ M. J. Landa, "Die Stellung der Juden in England," 932.

²⁵ Fritz Kahn, *Die Juden als Rasse und Kulturvolk*, 31-32.

²⁶ Kurt Hiller, "Ein Leninist," 64.

²⁷ Artur Dinter, *Die Sünde wider die Liebe; ein Zeitroman*, 78.

besonders auf seinen *Faust*, in dem nach Julius Fauchers Ausspruch *alles* steht. Und ich will's versuchen zu sagen, was mir der Schlüssel zu diesem Juwelenschrein der Seele und der Erkenntnis zu sein scheint.²⁸

This key, needless to say, lay in the fact that “[s]o gut wie Faust den deutschen Genius (nicht das deutsche Genie), so repräsentiert Mephisto den jüdischen Geist.”²⁹ Yet even here, the author displays little inclination to engage directly with Goethe’s actual drama, and the reasons we are given for how it is that “[d]es Chaos wunderlicher Sohn” (1384) has managed to throw all of Europe into ruin will again convince nobody except those readers who already subscribe to an anti-Semitic world view.

But if these writers steered clear of presenting a fully explicit exegesis of Goethe’s *Faust* according to an anti-Semitic schema, there were indeed good reasons for this. Most allegorical readings have a tendency to break down when they are pushed too far; their plausibility evaporates on contact with the actual text, whose many refractory intricacies do not admit of such schematizing simplifications. And rarely is this truer than in the present case. In spite of the similarities outlined above, the idea that Goethe may have intended his modern devil as an embodiment of Jews or Judaism will strike anyone who has actually read the play as downright risible. Consider, for instance, the two most well-known programmatic self-descriptions of Mephistopheles during his first interview with Faust: while “Ich bin der Geist, der stets verneint” (1338) may be thought, if one is so inclined, to have an application to Jews as the anti-Semites conceived of them (though again, only in a vaguely general sense), the phrase “Ein Teil von jener Kraft, / Die stets das Böse will und stets das Gute schafft” (1335-6) is so contrary to such a reading that it alone suffices to demolish it beyond repair. No anti-Semite ever said that though the Jews meant to do harm, they were in fact beneficial through the consequences of their ill-intended actions. Similarly, God’s words to the devil during the prologue in heaven – “Ich habe deinesgleichen nie gehaßt” (337) – are very difficult indeed to reconcile with the idea that he might be talking to a deicide, as the Jews were traditionally blamed for the crucifixion of Christ. There are clear hints in Goethe’s drama that the force embodied by Mephistopheles is necessary, and that the task for either Faust or any person is not to exorcize it, but to integrate it into the personality; to bring the two souls that famously reside in Faust’s breast (1112) into harmony. Arguably the most glaring contradiction, however, exists between the very pronounced streak of pessimism in Mephistopheles’ character, and the shallow optimism typically ascribed to the Jews, and thought to be embodied in the Old Testament. This cheerful affirmation of immediate reality is a far cry indeed from the cutting nihilism of

²⁸ Ottomar Beta, “‘Old Iniquity’ (Goethes *Faust* und Hermann Türck.)”, 215.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 224.

verses such as: “denn alles, was entsteht, / Ist wert, daß es zugrunde geht; / Drum besser wär’s, daß nichts entstünde” (1339-41).³⁰

Taking this into account, it is scarcely surprising that the first instance of a more fully developed anti-Semitic reading of *Faust* that I have come across was immediately travestied mercilessly.³¹ Thus we read in the *Mittheilungen aus dem Verein zur Abwehr des Antisemitismus*, a publication exclusively devoted to the struggle against the anti-Semitic movement:

Manchmal erfreut eine Gabe unfreiwilligen Humors unser Herz. Und dann sind wir nicht ohne Dankbarkeit. Selten aber empfanden wir dieses Gefühl in solcher Echtheit, als angesichts der Lektüre eines Aufsatzes, betitelt “Goethe als Antisemit”, der im Wiener *Deutschen Volksblatt* stand und dann durch die ganze Antisemitenpresse lief. Dieses fröhliche Produkt ist nichts weniger als ein *neuer* Versuch, Goethes *Faust* zu erklären, ein so glänzender Versuch, dass wir diese Perle antisemitischer Hanswursterei zum Abdruck bringen wollen. Es handelt sich um die Gegenüberstellung: Gott und Teufel, Faust und Mephistopheles, Arier und – Juden.³²

There follows a lengthy exposition of the ridiculed article, with an ample supply of quotes. The anti-Semites’ attempt to capitalize on Mephistopheles’ cynical realism, feigned elegance, corrupt speech, invention of paper money, and general enmity against the Christian God, seeing in these attributes clear signs that he must be regarded as a Jew, were thus easily exposed as nothing more than empty buffoonery, with precious little relevance for Goethe’s actual masterpiece. A few years later, a different journal printed a spoof letter from a “christlich-sozialer Wahlmann” to the mayor of Vienna Karl Lueger, in which it was argued in jest that “Mephistopheles ist der Typhus des *polnischen Handelsjuden*.” That all of this was meant as a parody was evident throughout:

Schon die Endung “eles” duftet nach Knoblauch, vergleiche
“Veiteles, Jeiteles” u.s.w.

Um keinen Zweifel zu lassen, stellt er sich ausdrücklich vor als:
“Herr der Ratten und der Mäuse,
Der Fliegen, Frösche, Wanzen, Läuse” u.s.w.

³⁰ It should be said, however, that Mephistopheles also stands for a powerfully affirmative sexual, and to a degree creational impulse. This may be easier to bring into line with an anti-Semitic reading, though it certainly does not suggest one in and of itself.

³¹ It may perhaps be well to point out the obvious here: that the present survey cannot lay claim to any exhaustiveness. Given the prodigious amounts of anti-Semitic literature produced during the span covered in this essay, it is highly probable that earlier cases where Mephistopheles was interpreted as a Jewish figure can be found. There is little reason to believe that the practice was particularly widespread, however; and additional evidence would at any rate not fundamentally alter the analysis.

³² *Mittheilungen aus dem Verein zur Abwehr des Antisemitismus*, October 14, 1899, No. 41.

Selbstverständlich muß Faust den Kontrakt *schriftlich* machen. Man kann doch nicht wissen, wozu es gut ist, so e Kontraktele!! Ohne Blutsaugerei geht's dabei nicht ab. [...] Er nennt sich übrigens mit Recht den Herrn der Frösche, Wanzen, Läuse, sagt er doch mit echt jüdischer Chutzpe selbst von sich: "Ich kratz' den Kopf, reib' an den Händen."
Wer zweifelt da noch an der Abstammung Mephisto's? ³³

It is of course true that most anti-Semites would not have cared much what their enemies said; but it nevertheless seems reasonable to suspect that even they realized that the stronger arguments were not on their side on this issue.

It should also be kept in mind that this particular fight over *Faust* took place within a larger context of an argument over Goethe's own personal attitude towards the Jews. One of the most conspicuous features of German anti-Semitic propaganda is its obsessive tendency to quote whatever hostile remarks that famous writers and thinkers of the past may have uttered against the Jews. Whoever sets out to study this literature in depth will soon learn the pronouncements of Fichte, Herder, Goethe, or Wagner by heart, even if he or she would prefer not to. Fritsch's *Handbuch der Judenfrage* is largely based on this principle; and another tract from this resilient propagandist, whose tireless activities spanned some 50 years, connecting the early *Kaiserreich* with the rise of Nazism, in fact consists of nothing else – and Goethe has been allotted a total of 4 pages out of 60 in this collection of *Urteile berühmter Männer über das Judentum*.³⁴ When Hitler refers in *Mein Kampf* to Goethe's alleged disgust on hearing that marriages between Jews and Germans would henceforth be legally permitted, it would of course be utterly mistaken to deduce from this that he derived this knowledge from any serious study of Goethe's life and works.³⁵ Instead, it was this tradition of gathering whatever sayings might serve as ammunition in the anti-Semitic struggle that spoke through him. Disagreement over Goethe's attitude towards Jews had in fact played a role in triggering the public squabble that has subsequently become known – rather infelicitously, I would submit – as the "Berliner Antisemitismusstreit." In his magisterial, yet sometimes provocatively unapologetic multi-volume history of the Jews, Heinrich Graetz had little patience with what he perceived as the anti-Semitic stance of men like Goethe and Fichte:

³³ "Antisemitisches Theaterrepertoire," in: *Jugend*, 1903, No. 48.

³⁴ Theodor Fritsch, *Urteile berühmter Männer über das Judentum: von Tacitus bis Bismarck*.

³⁵ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 341: "noch Goethe ist entsetzt bei dem Gedanken, daß künftig die Ehe zwischen Christen und Juden nicht mehr gesetzlich verboten sein soll." In his clearly semi-fictional, but nevertheless highly informative dialogue *Der Bolschewismus von Moses bis Lenin: Zwiegespräch zwischen Adolf Hitler und mir*, Eckart lets the future dictator quote a line from *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*, where Friedrich posits that in a future ideal society, Jews cannot be tolerated, as this would rupture the Christian unity. References to this passage likewise belonged to the standard fare in the anti-Semitic propaganda of the time. Needless to say, few of the writers who quoted this bothered to reflect on the fact that Goethe's personal views were not necessarily identical to those voiced by the characters in his literary works.

Zwei Männer ersten Ranges, der größte Dichter und der größte Denker jener Zeit, *Goethe* und *Fichte*, theilten die Eingenommenheit der Deutschen gegen die Juden, und machten kein Hehl daraus; [...] Göthe, der Vertreter der aristokratischen Kreise, und Fichte, der Verfechter der demokratischen Richtung in Deutschland, beide wünschten die Juden wie Verpestete, weit, weit von der christlichen Gesellschaft entfernt. Beide waren zwar mit der Kirche zerfallen, [...] und beide galten als Atheisten. Nichtsdestoweniger verabscheuten sie die Juden im Namen Jesu.³⁶

When the influential historian and liberal politician Heinrich von Treitschke presented his case against the Jews in a soon-to-become notorious essay for the *Preußische Jahrbücher*, it was palpable that he had been provoked in part by Graetz's aspersions against these heroes of German culture:

Man lese die Geschichte der Juden von Graetz: welche fanatische Wuth gegen den "Erbfeind", das Christenthum, welcher Todhaß gerade wider die reinsten und mächtigsten Vertreter germanischen Wesens, von Luther bis herab auf Goethe und Fichte!³⁷

Treitschke's tactic here was to exacerbate the tensions between Jews and non-Jews by painting Goethe and Fichte as the victims of Jewish aggression, rather than vice versa. Graetz's censures were slyly exaggerated, while his words of praise were suppressed. At the same time, amplifying the antagonism the Jews allegedly felt against Germany's most illustrious writer made it easier for anti-Semites like Treitschke to claim that he was on their side in the current battle. When this became plain, most Jewish writers took a position fundamentally different from that of Graetz, and instead tried to emphasize Goethe's cosmopolitanism, tolerance, and religious scepticism.³⁸

In this tug-of-war, we again recognize the same argumentative pattern that was visible in the anti-Semitic reading of *Faust*: only now it is Goethe rather than the hero of his greatest drama who stands for spirit and idealism, while everything that is contrary to this is associated with Judaism. As one arbitrary example, we may take an article from the early years of the *Völkischer Beobachter*, railing fiercely against "Die Verjudung der Goethe-Gesellschaft":

Wie in aller Welt war es überhaupt möglich, daß Juden in die Goethegesellschaft Aufnahme finden konnten? Was will der jüdische platt-materialistische Geist in dieser Gemeinde deutscher

³⁶ Heinrich Graetz, *Geschichte der Juden vom Beginn der Mendelssohnschen Zeit (1750) bis in die neueste Zeit (1848)*, 245.

³⁷ Heinrich von Treitschke, *Ein Wort über unser Judenthum*, 2-3.

³⁸ This also explains why they would almost welcome it when a prominent anti-Semite like Dühring accused Goethe of offering a "Beschönigung, ja Rechtfertigung des Teufels," for which reason his works allegedly had an especial appeal for Jews. An article in the *Mittheilungen aus dem Verein zu Abwehr des Antisemitismus* comments: "Links die braven Stellen, rechts die Mephisto-Szenen. Erstere lesen seine Anhänger, diese die Juden!", January 17, 1900, No. 3.

Idealisten? Was weiß und versteht ein Jude von dem urdeutschen Goethe und dem aus diesem Genie heraus geborenen echt deutschen Idealismus? Es gibt in der Welt doch, weiß Gott, keine schrofferen Gegensätze als einen Juden und Goethe als den jüdischen Materialismus und Goetheschen Idealismus.³⁹

The dualism constructed here is well nigh absolute. And in proportion as Goethe was hailed to the skies as “den edelsten Schatz des deutschen Volkes,”⁴⁰ so the Jews were placed ever lower, and their putative opposition naturally took on a demonic quality.

(IV)

The sheer preposterousness of any reading of *Faust* explicitly claiming that Mephistopheles should be understood as a Jewish figure probably explains why Houston Stewart Chamberlain steered clear of this argument in his tome on Goethe from 1912. As one of the most influential of all anti-Semitic ideologues, he naturally commanded great attention, and for the present survey his views are of considerable significance. Chamberlain was a much more polished polemicist than his anti-Semitic brethren, and he was cautious about stating his views too bluntly, particularly in the beginning of his writing career. Though by his own confession a dilettante, there is no denying his immense erudition, which set him clearly apart from more lowbrow demagogues like Fritsch, Hermann Ahlwardt, and Carl Paasch. If Chamberlain had endorsed an anti-Semitic interpretation of *Faust*, there is ample reason to believe that a host of lesser scribblers would have followed his lead, regarding his putative authority as sufficient proof. Conversely, a rejection of this theory from Chamberlain’s pen might well have sunk it permanently. What we have, however, is a pervasive silence on the matter, through some 850 pages of dense expository prose. And though this silence can arguably be read as an implicit rejection of the anti-Semitic reading of *Faust*, there are nevertheless a number of hints that may point in the direction of such a reading. Thus Chamberlain explicates Mephistopheles as an incarnation of nature devoid of, and at enmity with, spirit; and his discussion of this figure follows closely on the heels of a section emphasizing Goethe’s Christianity, which Chamberlain claims was much stronger than is commonly believed.⁴¹ It is in this section, moreover, that Chamberlain touches for the one and only time in this massive book on Goethe’s alleged opposition to Jews and Judaism. We are confronted with a number of tantalizing hints, which it seems difficult to ascribe to mere chance. It is as if Chamberlain wanted to suggest an anti-Semitic interpretative schema of *Faust* to those readers who were ideologically inclined to accept it, while at the same time avoiding the ridicule of the sober-minded by never presenting it openly.

³⁹ *Völkischer Beobachter*, June 8, 1923, No. 110.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Houston Stewart Chamberlain, *Goethe*, 679-706.

Chamberlain's attitude seems to have been typical also among those Goethe scholars who shared his narrowly nationalistic outlook. Thus it appears that most works on Goethe published in the Third Reich were similarly emphatic in their Nazification both of the author personally, and of Faust as a literary character. Nazi *Germanisten* vied with each other in their portrayal of a *Faust im Brauhemd*, as one almost laughably crude title has it.⁴² Yet while they could portray Faust as the archetypal German hero, whose efforts to win land from the sea in the final act of *Faust, Part Two* prefigured the Nazis' own drive for more *Lebensraum* in the East, they seemingly never pursued the possibility of reading Mephistopheles as a Jew to the extremes of which it was capable. Alfred Rosenberg's *Der Mythos des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts* may be taken as one more example of this trend. On the one hand we find a very pronounced idealization of Faust, stylized as the dynamic quintessence of the German race:

Goethe stellte im Faust das *Wesen* von uns dar, das Ewige, welches nach jedem Umguß unserer Seele in der neuen Form wohnt. Er ist dadurch der Hüter und Bewahrer unserer *Anlage* geworden, wie unser Volk keinen zweiten besitzt.⁴³

At another point, Rosenberg refers to Goethe's drama as "De[n] größte[n] Hymnus auf menschliche Tätigkeit,"⁴⁴ which he clearly means positively, given the general valorisation of energy that pervades this wretched treatise. Such grand pronouncements automatically suggest that Mephistopheles, if he is taken to represent a force that is diametrically opposed to Faust, might also be read as a force that is diametrically opposed to the quintessence of the German race – and who that is hardly needs repeating. Indeed, Rosenberg does come quite close to making this deduction explicit:

Shylock ist also sowohl Einzelmensch wie Typus, *ein* Jude sowohl wie das Judentum. Das Gleiche gilt vom Mephistopheles, dessen ästhetischer Eindruck gleichfalls weder auf Schönheit noch auf Kraft beruht, sondern auf seiner inneren Notwendigkeit, d. h. auf dem künstlerischen Akt, der ihn schuf.⁴⁵

Quite close – but still, Rosenberg too, just like Chamberlain before him, shies away from making the identification outright.

⁴² This is also the title of an informative essay dealing with this aspect of the Goethe reception by Kirsten Belgum, Karoline Kirst-Gundersen, and Paul Levesque: " 'Faust im Brauhemd': *Germanistik* and Fascism." The authors have collected much material to show how the Nazis extolled Goethe as one of theirs, yet there is no more than passing mention of the role of Mephistopheles, whom Georg Schott apparently revealed as "the quintessential Jewish intellectual, a master of 'Talmudic' logic" (p. 159) in his *Goethes Faust in heutiger Schau*.

⁴³ Alfred Rosenberg, *Der Mythos des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts: Eine Wertung der seelisch-geistigen Gestaltenkämpfe unserer Zeit*, 515.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 260.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 412.

(V)

But there was one man who did go all the way, with a conviction that can only have been born of utter fanaticism. This was Dietrich Eckart, failed poet and playwright, alcoholic and morphine addict, who arguably carried anti-Semitism to previously unimagined levels of metaphysical ambition, where it became not just a key to understanding man's social existence, but a key to understanding the very essence of existence itself. Eckart's early death shortly after the failed Beer Hall Putsch of 1923, precluded his name from becoming as closely associated with the Nazi movement as Rosenberg's would, and he has not received the same degree of attention that many other of the Nazi leaders have attracted, often quite perversely. Yet in terms of imaginative power – and one is tempted to say evil – he was in fact much more formidable than Rosenberg; and through his influence on Hitler, which may well have been profound and formative, he is probably of greater importance than his younger colleague for a fuller understanding of the Nazi *Weltanschauung*. Rosenberg was a superficial thinker whose academic pretensions made his prose dry and soporific. His magnum opus, *Der Mythos des zwanzigsten Jahrhundert*, is not quite the incomprehensible gibberish it is usually said to be; as a writer, Rosenberg did master his trade competently enough. But its arguments are bland and eminently unoriginal, and it is scarcely surprising that few among the Nazi leadership seem to have taken the trouble of actually ploughing through its 700 rambling pages. In contrast, Eckart was an altogether more powerful writer, whose darkly satanic visions are imaginative rather than academic, and all the stronger because of it. Rosenberg was a would-be historian; Eckart an evil prophet, with a poet's innate disregard for factual realities. Hitler never bothered to engage in any serious study of Rosenberg, whose dedication to the Nazi cause he never cared to cultivate, and whom he did not protect when Goebbels set about outmanoeuvring him. Eckart, on the other hand, is the man who is apostrophized “als der Besten einer” on the very last page of *Mein Kampf*, and whose name concludes the book.⁴⁶

According to Eckart himself, his favourite writers were Schopenhauer and “Goethe, dieser Inbegriff des deutschen Wesens,”⁴⁷ yet there is reason to believe that he was even more profoundly influenced by Otto Weininger, whose *Geschlecht und Charakter* has left traces all over Eckart's prose. It was Weininger who helped Eckart develop a version of anti-Semitism that was imaginative rather than pseudo-scientific; metaphysical rather than racial. His Jew-hatred was so extreme as to assume cosmic dimensions. To Eckart, the dualism between the German and the Jewish was just as absolute as, and in fact coterminous with, the dualism between good and evil: “zwischen allem Jüdischen und allem Nichtjüdischen klafft ein unüberbrückbarer Abgrund.”⁴⁸ The Jew, moreover, is a creature whose entire existence is aimed at one sole objective:

⁴⁶ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 781.

⁴⁷ *Auf gut deutsch. Wochenschrift für Ordnung u. Recht*, ed. Dietrich Eckart. Heft 16/18. 1921, p. 213.

⁴⁸ Eckart, *Das ist der Jude!*, 388-389.

the extirpation of everything transcendent and ideal – nothing less, in fact, than “die *Entseelung der Welt*.”⁴⁹

For Eckart, then, the Jew is evil incarnate: the devil. And for a man reared on Goethe, the temptation of extending this identification to the greatest work of his greatest hero must have been irresistible. Yet Eckart too starts out hesitantly. Thus he concludes one section of his “Laienpredigt” *Das ist der Jude!* with the same enigmatic suggestiveness we have become accustomed to by now: “Wer im *Faust* das Vorspiel im Himmel versteht, weiß, was ich meine. Mehr kann ich für heute nicht sagen.”⁵⁰ Earlier, however, he had been more explicit: quoting Mephistopheles’ programmatic intention “Das Unterste ins Oberste zu kehren” (10090), Eckart goes on: “So spricht Mephisto, ebenfalls ein ‘prominenter’ Jude.”⁵¹ And a few pages on, he comes out with a clarity that is absolutely unambiguous:

Proteus, Locki, Mephisto – ein und derselbe Verwandlungskünstler, der Jude! Bald das hündische Wesen des Pudels, bald die treuherzige Miene des fahrenden Scholasten, des unterwürfigen Dieners, bald in der Maske der himmelanstrebenden Faustnatur das verlogene Spiel mit dem Schüler (der Jude als deutscher Professor!), bald der zwinkernde Führer durch alle Nachtlokale des Blocksberg, bald der geschäftige Günstling des geldbedürftigen Kaisers, bald dies und bald das, und immer das gleiche gemeine Geschöpf!⁵²

We recognize here many of the parallels enumerated in the course of this article: from Mephistopheles’ protean nature, to his false elegance and perfidious invention of paper money. Eckart went on to develop this reading at even greater length in another profoundly anti-Semitic text, *Das Judentum in und außer uns*, and one passage in particular merits extensive quotation here:

Der bis ins tiefste Mark überzeugte Leugner der Seele ist deren Todfeind, geradezu besessen darauf, jede Spur von ihr auszutilgen. Auch das hat Goethe niedergelegt, und zwar auf unvergleichliche Weise im Urbild aller Seelenlosigkeit, im *Mephisto*; dort, wo dieser Faustens Leiche mit wutschnaubenden Worten, weil schlimmster Ahnungen voll, von seinen höllischen Trabanten auf die Möglichkeit einer Seele untersuchen lässt, als der dumme Teufel, der er trotz seiner Schlauheit oder vielmehr gerade ihretwegen ist.⁵³

Eckart then goes on to quote a strophe from the conclusion of *Faust, Part Two* as an alleged proof of this eccentric theory:

⁴⁹ In: Rosenberg, *Dietrich Eckart: Ein Vermächtnis*, 219.

⁵⁰ Eckart, *Das ist der Jude!*, 388.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 376.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 393.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 221-222.

Nun, wanstige Schufften mit den Feuerbacken!
Ihr glüht so recht vom Höllenschwefel feist;
Klotzartige, kurze, nie bewegte Nacken!
Hier unten lauert, ob's wie Phosphor gleißt:
Das ist das Seelchen, Psyche mit den Flügeln,
Die rupft ihr aus, so ist's ein garstiger Wurm;
Mit meinem Stempel will ich sie besiegeln,
Dann fort mit ihr im Feuerwirbelsturm! (11656-63)

Admittedly, the second part of Goethe's elephantine lyric is a prodigiously dense text, whose every verse demands the most careful scrutiny from the informed reader, and we should be careful of pronouncing too certainly what it may – or may not – mean. Even so, it is staggering to see how heedlessly Eckart jumps to his conclusions:

Daß Goethe sich auch hier jedes Wort genau überlegt hat, versteht sich wohl von selbst. "Klotzartige, kurze, nie bewegte Nacken!" Jeder von uns kennt solche Genicke die Menge, aber nicht jeder weiß, was sie bei Goethe für eine Bedeutung haben. Ich werde noch öfters Gelegenheit finden, die geheimnisvollen Gedankengänge des Mephisto dem Leser zu offenbaren.⁵⁴

Eckart had a relatively limited readership, even after the Nazis came to power. An edition of his works was planned, but never realized, and few of his writings were reprinted. It can be reiterated yet again, therefore, that there is very little reason to believe that this sordidly skewed take on *Faust* ever spread to wider circles of the general reading public. Ultimately, the crucial question here is to what degree Eckart's dark vision was transplanted to Hitler. Consider, for instance, the end of *Der Bolschewismus von Moses bis Lenin*, which is rightly considered Eckart's central ideological statement:

"Es ist wohl so," meinte er, "wie du einmal geschrieben hast: man kann den Juden nur verstehen, wenn man weiss, wohin es ihn letzten Endes drängt. Ueber die Weltherrschaft hinaus, zur *Vernichtung* der Welt. [...] Auf das ist er eingestellt, dazu drängt es ihn; obwohl er dunkel ahnt, dass er sich dadurch mitvernichtet. Er kann nicht aus, er muss es tun. Dieses Gefühl für die unbedingte Abhängigkeit seiner Existenz von der seines Opfers scheint mir die Hauptursache seines Hasses zu sein. Einen mit aller Gewalt vernichten zu müssen, gleichzeitig aber zu ahnen, dass das rettungslos zum eigenen Untergang führt, daran liegt's. Wenn du willst: die Tragik des Luzifer."⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Ibid., 222.

⁵⁵ Eckart, *Der Bolschewismus von Moses bis Lenin*, 49-50. The work abounds with references to Goethe, and on p. 39 we read: " 'Also in allen Lagern,' nickte ich vor mich hin, 'mehr oder minder verkappt, mehr oder minder mächtig, der Mephisto.' "

While it is patently obvious that this alleged dialogue cannot possibly be an accurate transcript of words that either Hitler or Eckart actually spoke to one another, there is every reason to believe that it still reflects their actual views. And while on the one hand, the presence of Eckart's thinking is very strong here; on the other, it is also language that bears an uncanny resemblance to a central credo of *Mein Kampf*:

Siegt der Jude mit Hilfe seines marxistischen Glaubensbekenntnisses über die Völker dieser Welt, dann wird seine Krone der Totentanz der Menschheit sein, dann wird dieser Planet wieder wie einst vor Jahrmillionen menschenleer durch den Äther ziehen.⁵⁶

Whether or not, or to what degree, Eckart really was Hitler's spiritual mentor seems to me impossible to determine with any certainty, though there are plenty of sensationalist writers who seem to be hampered by no such uncertainties. Hitler did claim that his anti-Semitism deepened around the time of his acquaintance with Eckart, and there is indeed much to suggest that he told the truth on this occasion.⁵⁷ It would be a testimony as chilling as any to the continued power of the long-standing tradition of superimposing the spectre of the Jew on the figure of the Devil.

⁵⁶ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 69-70. The same quasi-theological perspective comes into view a few lines later on the same page: "So glaube ich heute im Sinne des Allmächtigen Schöpfers zu handeln: Indem ich mich des Juden erwehre, kämpfe ich für das Werk der Herrn."

⁵⁷ That Hitler became fiercely anti-Semitic only in 1919, after the experience of the *Räterepublik* and the revolutionary turmoil, has recently been persuasively, though surely not conclusively, argued by Ralf Georg Reuth in *Hitlers Judenhass: Klischee und Wirklichkeit*.

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